AN ETHICS CRISIS IN VIRTUAL MEDIA SPACE

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Abstract: This paper will address basic ethical issues in virtual space determined by global multidirectional networking through different space and time. Numerous ethical issues will be stressed which, as a result of the complex reflections of ubiquitous media convergence, determine each individual topic, from issues of personal data protection and information security, to strengthening credibility and building trust in the virtual community. In relation to the objectives and established development guidelines, different ethical dimensions, in their complexity and multi-layeredness in a digitally empowered future, should not be viewed in isolation but exclusively through their complementarity and a quality foundation for further in-depth research.

Keywords: virtual space, media, social networks, ethics.

Introduction

In response to market challenges, the media constantly strives to raise the professional ladder, while the existential imperative is visualized through the need to be the first, constantly present and different from others. In such an environment, media workers have less and less time to confirm the veracity of information which, along with the emergence of user-generated content within the online sphere, has contributed to the accelerated erosion of journalism. In a virtual space that knows no time and space boundaries, each individual has the opportunity to create his own vision of reality and distribute his own truth about phenomena, events and personalities. Given insufficient statutory regulations, but also the absence of an effective control mechanism, the global network is a space for a plethora of subjectively colored, incomplete, and often inaccurate information.

Despite its modest credibility, online media has been experiencing a multi-year upward trend that may be explained by the fact that the audience in media hyperproduction is less and less oriented towards a search for information, and has been increasingly exhibiting the expectation that media products should find them.

Multimedia platforms do not have passive information recipients but active users who autonomously create and market new content, and have unlimited opportunities to redistribute existing information. The communication dynamics offered by web 2, to members of the virtual community, transformed the static observer into an individual who, thanks to interactivity, actively participates through unlimited space and time.

The veracity and credibility of information, in an unregulated virtual space, makes online media the weakest link on the media market, where professional standards are consciously suppressed by favoring sensationalist titles and forms. The speed of information transmission has become its key quality, leading the media to a state that can be diagnosed as an autoimmune disease that sacrifices professionalism and destroys reputation.

Media discourse should be significantly strengthened with ethically sensitized topics. It cannot simply rely on the sporadic steps of individuals who, through ethically sensitized topics content, reflect on the future of not only the profession but society as a whole.

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Virtual space between rights and obligations

"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog", the now iconic cartoon by Peter Steiner was published in the American newspaper The New Yorker on July 5, 1993, and shows two dogs, one is seated at a computer as he utters this phrase to his companion seated on the floor. The symbolism in the phrase, which indicates the ability of the user to receive and send messages clouded by privacy and anonymity, did not receive much public attention at the beginning, but later interest grew so much that it is still being talked about as the most reproduced cartoon of The New Yorker.

"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

Image 1. "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog"
Source: Steiner, 1993.

Over the past few decades, the digital landscape has changed beyond recognition. The first phase in the evolution of digitally driven technology was characterized by the process of convergence, where "Internet 1.0" basically dominated, with numerous information, entertainment and communication technologies for printing, publishing, broadcasting and telecommunications. The economic, editorial, creative, and consumer consequences arising from the Internet have been profoundly transformative for society, enabling, for the first time, the potential connectivity of individuals and groups.

The second phase of digital evolution, which we recognize as "Internet 2.0", is characterized by user-generated content and the emergence of social media. It is social media that has become dominant in our digital landscape with a variety of descriptive clichés for connection and expression such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Tik-Tok, etc.

"Internet 3.0" refers to artificial intelligence and includes technologies such as blockchain. In many ways, Internet 3.0 is already strongly present in all fields (Williams, 2022).

Ethics in the media implies a healthy media environment: functional legislation, a high education level of journalists, their economic stability and independence, as well as the financial stability and autonomy of their media houses (Skrozza, 2013).

In order to preserve its reputation, the Reuters Agency established standards that represent a guide for understanding overall media activities, and made the features of journalistic work transparent (Reuters News Agency):
• Adhere to the principle of trust in all news activities;
• Keep punctuality sacred;
• Look for an honest comment;
• Correct errors transparently;
• Strive for balance and freedom from bias;
• Disclose potential or actual conflicts of interest to the manager;
• Avoid injecting unattributed opinion into a media story;
• Do not invent or plagiarize;
• Do not modify still images or video footage, except by methods normally used to prepare content for editorial use;
• Do not pay for information, accept bribes or trade inside information.

Afzal (2012) notes that a large number of virtual space interactions depend on the right information, and that it is the abundance of information that has led to the need for evaluation: there should be services that can help the user find out about the nature of available information, that is, about its authenticity, scope and quality.

Fragmentation and new mergers will be accelerated within many media components, and will be accompanied by outcome unpredictability. However, as Williams (2022) points out, with so few barriers to entry into the digital world, the cost of failure has never been lower as the cost of innovation continues to decline. This is of crucial importance as it represents a big change, especially for existing companies, as the previous protection erodes from that position.

If we agree that digital media ethics targets a wide range of ethical issues, practices and online media norms, we will recognize numerous dilemmas that require quick answers, primarily about how global and multimedia professional journalism can use online information and photos, created as user-generated content. Therefore, differentiation takes place at the level of two extremes: one extreme is professional journalism based on truth, integrity and impartiality of the so-called "gatekeepers", while on the other, the online side, we have an insistence on speed, subjectivity, directness and rectifications after content publishing.

Davidović (2022) points to the personal aspect, verification and ethics in the use, transfer and dissemination of information, considering that these are relevant determinants of information literacy, which clearly emphasize that the consequences of information (il)literacy is of concern to everyone. Focusing on citizens - media consumers, the author emphasizes the necessity of establishing a critical attitude towards the content, while at the same time understanding the information and media functioning.

Establishing standards for informed consent for the acquisition, retention and sharing of personal data is an elementary prerequisite for all other ethical issues, i.e., issues of concern for the digital user. The intersection between the Internet and privacy begins with the realization that applications and devices are collecting vast amounts of data, which can in turn be analyzed, shared, and used. Trust is essential for this complex network of systems to achieve the desired outcome, yet it often disappears off the radar (Allhoff, & Henschke, 2018).

The forced mass transfer of communication processes into the digital space of social networks, online services, discussion platforms and blogs, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, exposed the need to establish common rules of communication within a virtual space. Some authors unequivocally indicate that it became obvious that anonymity, and as a result, the permissibility of speech behavior against the background of general social tension, has caused a sharp increase in the use of indecent language, insults aimed at individuals, certain social groups and societies as a whole, and has also contributed to the spread of false and slanderous information (Krasnova et al, 2022).

Despite the fact that there are numerous examples of how virtual reality, by inspiring social change, can be used to improve the quality of life, Fiona McEvoy (2017) lists 10 ethical concerns:

Vulnerability. In order to create a hyper-realistic environment, reality is often masked in order to create an overall immersive experience. Limited access to sensory data makes users vulnerable to accidents and can lead to a complete disruption in functioning.

Social isolation. The entire experience takes place in one user's field of vision, which consequently excludes all others from physically participating. Despite the fact that certain social networks provide the possibility of interaction between users, the issue of their neglect of social connections and the real "face to face" world remains.

Desensitization. A well-known threat is that immersion in a virtual reality environment can cause some users to become desensitized to the real world, i.e., inability to empathize with acts of violence.

Overestimation of ability. The problem has been detected that users overestimate their abilities in the real world, basing those abilities on experiences gained in virtual space.

Psychiatric effects. There is a concern that virtual reality could reveal the psychiatric vulnerability of individuals much faster, i.e., cause some users to experience psychotic episodes.

Distasteful fantasies. In themselves, tasteless fantasies are not problematic until they become impressive. For example, to what extent is it acceptable to make a game out of the events of 9/11?

Virtual crime. In order to clarify at what point virtual behavior constitutes an impermissible act in the real world, there is a need to appreciate and understand the pain, harm, violence and trauma inflicted by other users in a virtual environment.

Manipulation. Attempts at corporate manipulation with the help of flashy advertising gimmicks are not new, but so far they have been two-dimensional.

Appropriate roaming and responsiveness. One of the most exciting selling points of virtual space is that it can allow us to roam the earth from the comfort of our homes, a good experience for those who

cannot travel. However, this is probably where one must think about where it is appropriate to have a virtual experience.

Privacy and data. The more we "connect" in the virtual world, the more we will have to give of ourselves. That could mean growing privacy concerns.

The author Nikolić (2010) notes that the ethical responsibility of the media is enormous, perhaps many times greater than that of other public institutions, given that their reach is direct and truly global, and emphasizes that the media perceive reality and present it, while the most common question may be to what extent they deconstruct the same reality, and then represent the realized image in a way and in accordance with one's expectations.

Perrsonal and business use of social networks

Social networking is a phenomenon that strongly influences the work of media organizations and the daily interaction between individuals. Social multidirectional connections result in a vast production of user-generated content, transmission and dissemination of information.

The reasons for the use of social media, especially social networks, should be sought in their continuous availability, economy and interest, as well as in the fact that the media product can be seen as a semi-finished product which has not been ultimately defined, and which gives the possibility of so-called feedback links, thus visualizing the increasingly thin border between producers and consumers of media content (Sančanin, & Ratković Njegovan, 2020).

Authenticity, transparency, and genuine intent are critical to building trusting personal and professional relationships, and as such, the ethical use of social media is paramount for both individuals and organizations. Ethics, by definition, is the concept of what is good, bad, right and wrong. In social media, a correct ethic equals a correct perspective and correct thinking about how to use social media appropriately and how to engage people in the right way. More precisely, ethics is a code of conduct within the context of our society (Socially Savvy, 2022).

One of the most popular online activities is the use of social media: there were 4.26 billion global users during 2021, while it has been predicted that this number will reach almost six billion by 2027 (Graph 1). The penetration of social networks has been increasing across all regions, and has been linked to the development of infrastructure as well as the availability of mobile devices. On average, users spend 144 minutes a day on social networks and messaging applications, which is an increase of more than half an hour compared to 2015 (Dixon, 2022a).
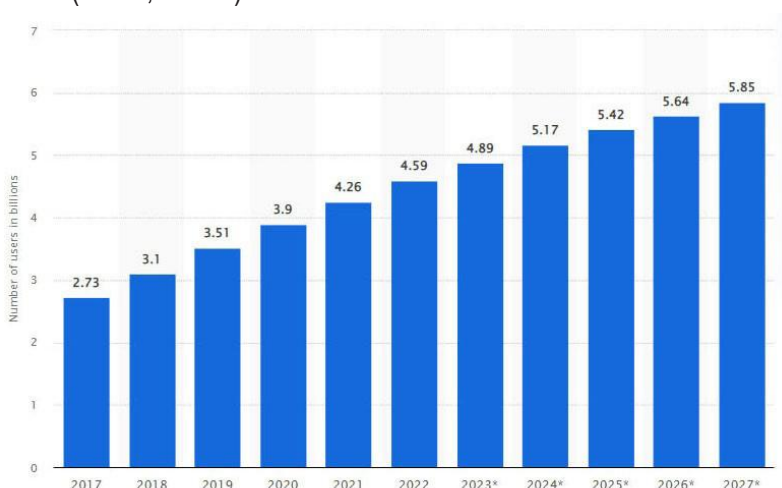
Graph 1. Number of social network users from 2018 until 2027
Source: Dixon, 2022a

A number of companies have realized the potential of the online environment and the opportunities provided by the exploitation of social networking sites. Each social network has unique characteristics or a specific purpose, and organizations strive to exponentially increase their visibility by recognizing that shared content lasts as long as its users redistribute and/or recreate it (Sančanin, & Čerović, 2021).

The use of social networks in a way that encourages innovative teamwork, co-creation of user value, cooperation with external partners and interactive communication between leaders and employees, represents an important driving force for business and individual change, which contributes to increased work productivity (Burrus, 2010).

Regardless of whether we use social networks for private or business purposes, in order to increase the number of followers and achieve the desired credibility, it is necessary to create a stable "Step By Step" activity schedule:

- Define the goals to be achieved through the use of social networks;
- Identify the target group;
- Choose keywords for more effective identification of the target group;
- Key messages must be unique, clear and easily accessible;
- Arouse the attention and move the target public to action;
- Consider previous user experiences;
- Ensure continuous control and adaptation to new circumstances.

With about 2.93 billion monthly active users in the second quarter of 2022, Facebook is the most used social network in the world. The platform surpassed two billion active users in the second quarter of 2017, and it took a little over 13 years to reach this milestone. For comparison purposes, it took Instagram 11.2 years and YouTube 14 years to reach this landmark. The leading audience base of the Facebook social network is in India, with close to 330 million users, while the United States takes second place with 179 million users. The platform has experienced exceptional popularity in Indonesia and Brazil as well (Dixon, 2022b).

Although numerous studies point to a wide variety of misinformation on social media, Americans still rely heavily on platforms like Facebook and Twitter for their news. As many as 50% of American adults get their news from social media at least sometimes, making it their key source of information. Facebook and YouTube are the most frequently used news sources, with one in four US users regularly receiving news via both of these platforms. It is interesting to note that, during the last two years, Facebook, Twitter and other "established" social networks have seen a decline in the share of users who receive their news in this manner, probably as a result of revelations about systematic disinformation (Richter, 2022).

Research by the American non-profit organization Ethics Resource Center (Clancy, 2012) , dedicated to the relationship between ethics and social networks, showed that users of social networks show more tolerance for activities that are considered unethical. As many as 42% of active users said they consider it acceptable to blog or tweet about their company in a negative connotation, and that they consider it acceptable to take a copy of work software home and use it on their personal computer.

The survey conducted in the USA from July 18 to August 21, 2022, showed that in many cases there are demographic differences between those who are regularly informed on social networks. On some social networks, young people under the age of 30 make up the largest share: the 18-29 age group has the largest share on Snapchat (67%), TikTok (52%) and Reddit (50%). Women make up a larger share of regular news users on Facebook, while the opposite is true for sites like Twitter and Reddit (Pew Research Center, 2022).

The main issue with ethical behavior, regarding information technology in a business environment, is how it can be used to violate personal privacy, how someone can use sensitive information for personal gain, and whether or not it is within different degrees of what is considered ethical behavior (Farah, 2013).

Sančanin (2022) indicates that social networks enable direct communication and interactive contact with the target group, that is, they provide enviable breadth and profitability. Nevertheless, this kind of communication does not provide sufficient security, especially compared to control in traditional media, which is a visible deficiency but not so significant that it will represent a dam to future, frequent use of social networks. In this context, Krasnova et al., (2022) states that solving the perceived problems of digital ethics, requires a series of solutions that will enable the construction of a certain infrastructure aimed at limiting the destructive consequences of the growth of digital communication, as well as changes in the area of legislative and moral regulation. Understanding the increasing impact of digitization on individuals and society, as well as its consequences, presupposes an ethical reflection of digital processes on society and the development of a system of moral regulations.

The increasingly unethical practice of social networks is visible through information filtering, which, in this way, is not only unavailable to all users but consequently produces fragmentation and polarization of the virtual community. The process of globalization and increasingly intensive networking, as noted by Radović Marković, Salamzadeh and Vujičić (2019), imposes new economic and business patterns, which will reflect on the optimal use of resources and the provision of advantages to the most developed countries in the world. In this context, we should expect an even greater number and variety of ethical issues based on values such as expertise, excellence, autonomy, productivity and impartiality.

Conclusion

The creation of a unified code of ethics based on cultural values, and followed by its rapid and complete implementation, represents a rational and expected approach to solving a series of ethical dilemmas within the sphere of the culture of behavior within a virtual space. A special responsibility lies with the academic community, which is expected to, within the framework of digitalization inclusiveness, sensitize the professional and general public on topics of key ethical categories. Reducing the threshold of tolerance between the offline and online spheres is a process that should primarily provide users with the most complete informative and educational function, taking into account that virtual reality on social networks is both private and public, at the same time. Today, users of virtual media space give less faith to traditional authorities and increasingly more trust to online friends, but also to communities made up of unknown individuals. In an interaction thus created, with modest or no control mechanisms for entering the virtual space, the only constant will be uncertainty and change. The future nomination of such topics should further stimulate and encourage the continuous critical thinking of researchers, practitioners and educators about the dynamic and changing virtual space in order to constitute an applicable ethical code of conduct.

Conflict of interests
We have no known conflictof interest to disclose

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